

POLITICS AND PIETY
LUKE 4:16-30
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I would like to set the stage for this sermon by sharing with you something that happened on Thursday night. I had been working on the New Testament lesson for this morning all week: an important text to which the preacher is directed by the lectionary of the Church once a year. Some things were beginning to fall into place, but it really wasn't happening with much enthusiasm. And then I received a telephone call from my brother who is the Village Manager in Liberty, New York. You may have read the notice in Thursday's paper that there was an apartment house fire in Liberty and that eleven people died. Those eleven people were Puerto Ricans: the apartment house had no fire escape from the third floor: it was an ambiguous case - not overtly in violation in the code but certainly a questionable arrangement. The owner is wealthy: the city administration had only one option - evicting the tenants because of the safety hazard. But that would have meant great suffering for people who don't need any more suffering at the hands of our culture. And so the decision - and I take it that it was largely my brother's - was to allow them to stay and hope to persuade the owner to build a fire escape.

Eleven people are dead - most of them children: my brother called because he needed to talk to someone. In grief, rage and bitterness he noted that the Presbyterian Church, across the street from the apartment, - in which he is an Elder - recently refused to allow the neighbors in for coffee.

We didn't discuss that. In fact, all I did was listen and identify with my brother who was hurting. But what it provoked in me was an urgent reiteration of an old question - the question: What is the function of religion in life? Where is the locus of faith?

Two directions present themselves as alternatives: let's call the first "Out of this World" (1.) It is a reflection of a universal human desire to escape reality. It sees the function of religion in terms of providing a way out of the tensions, frustrations, fear and boredom that accompany

life. God is discussed in the past and future tenses, but not in the present. Salvation is something that will happen to the individual in the future. Since the focus is "out-of-this-world" the ethical implications of this kind of religion are "withdrawal." The believer is to protect himself from the dirtiness and sin of everything that is worldly. This position is held in common by adherents of all religions - some more than others. It has been characteristic of Christianity on and off, through our 2,000 year history. It is experiencing a renaissance in the 1970's.

The second direction is "down to earth". It sees the locus of religion in the world. It defines salvation in the present tense: it's God is one who is involved in the common life of the world. The issues about which it's concerned are, therefore, terribly worldly. It's ethical implications are in the direction of radical involvement in the life of the world. It too, from time to time, has been characteristic of Christianity. It is in trouble today.

A recent debate on the floor of Wabash Valley Presbytery illustrates how those two opposite directions are in conflict. The question was whether or not the Presbytery should purchase several apartment complexes in East Chicago that need a not-for-profit corporation in order to provide low and middle income housing. On the one side were those who were appalled by the suggestion that it is the business of the Presbyterian Church to provide for housing. Their preference would be to spend the money to build a church or to provide a minister to tell the people the Gospel. On the other side were those who believed the proposed to be a faithful reflection of the Gospel: and that in this way the Good News was, in fact, being told. The question is not yet resolved - but it presents itself to the Church at every level every day.

It would be less than candid of me to pretend neutrality on the issue. You know better than that. The Jesus I see in the New Testament was terribly

"down to earth." And yet I continue to see his church cashing in on this universal need for escapism by providing a religion that is "out of this world": that has little if anything to do with the issues that matter most to all men - a religion, the very appeal of which is its total irrelevance.

Now, let's look at Luke. Last Sunday we thought about how the fourth Gospel - John - introduces the life and public ministry of Jesus by way of a wedding feast at Cana and the miracle of the water become wine. Luke's introduction takes place in Nazareth, his home town; and it's a little like a politician returning home to announce his candidacy.

The scene is the Synagog on the Sabbath. The ritual prescribed that a certain portion of the law was to be read and a selection chosen from the prophets. Any member of the congregation could be asked to do this reading and then to sit down and comment, or preach, on the text. Sometimes this honor was assigned to a visiting dignitary. So it was that they invited Jesus, a local boy whom everybody knew with a growing reputation as a Rabbi, or teacher, whose career bore watching. He chose a text from Isaiah 61:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has annointed me to
preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim
release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."*

The good people of Nazareth "oooed and aawed" at that. It was a favorite passage, written by a prophet after the exile, but in the first century one with which the Jews easily identified. They were the poor - the captives - the oppressed. When the Messiah came he would change all that. He would rally the people and drive the Romans into the sea. The Kingdom of David

would rise again. Jesus had read what they wanted to hear.

But then he handed the scroll back to the attendant who placed it reverently in the ark: and he said something so incredible that for an instant they couldn't believe their ears: "Today this scripture which you have heard has been fulfilled." I can imagine a long, protracted, deadly silence: and then, "Did I hear right? Does he mean what I think he means? Joseph's son? Jesus, the carpenter? Its the most ridiculous thing I ever heard!"

Jesus sensed what was going on, and so he pulled out two stories from the scriptures, both of which illustrated how God works in ways people don't understand - in these two instances with people who were not Jews. And that incensed them: "They were filled with wrath": they ejected him and mob mentality would have thrown him over the hill.

Now, that is a very important passage of scripture - coming where it does - immediately after his baptism by John and his period of temptation in the wilderness: at the very beginning, that is to say, of his public life. And there are two directions that lead out of it - and that are important for our purpose this morning.

First, it establishes the base for everything that follows. From the beginning Jesus tried to focus people's attention on something that was happening in their midst. "The Kingdom of God" is now here. He rejected every suggestion that he was the main attraction: he saw his ministry in terms of announcing that the reign of God had begun: and he invited people to enter that Kingdom by obeying God's will.

But people didn't hear it that way. The evidence seems to be that the Jews - or at least a sizeable group of them - were interested in Jesus because they thought that he would precipitate a military revolt against Roam. They followed him until it became quite clear that he wasn't going to do it: that the Kingdom he was talking about was not at all the Kingdom

David, but rather a state of mind that cuts across all political allegiances, but that had to do directly with the quality of the common life of people.

Rome, likewise, heard him politically. The Romans knew that a man who loved poor people and associated with outcasts and had compassion for the oppressed would ultimately threaten their power. That is correct. What they didn't understand was that he was singularly uninterested in staging a military revolt. In any case, they dealt with him in the way governments have always dealt with threats to power - they got rid of him.

That's the first rather complex understanding that comes out of this text. The threat of Jesus' message was that the Kingdom of God is now present within the common life of the world. And while that did not mean a military revolt - which the Jews wanted and the Romans feared - it most certainly meant that a different set of priorities were now on the agenda for anyone who wanted to be a part of God's Kingdom. Life was now about to be changed radically: the poor - the oppressed - the blind - the captives - are now about to hear some good news.

The second understanding that grows out of Luke's text is that Jesus Christ made the abstract specific. He took the "out of this world" religion of men and brought it "down to earth". Something that men don't ordinarily want to happen: something that means always to precipitate conflict and controversy.

Think about that for a minute: think about these abstractions:

Independence - Emancipation - Non Violence - God - Faith. Just words: ideas: concepts that float freely in the mind. But then place - names - dates - events beside them.

Independence - an abstraction until made specific by Thomas Jefferson writing a Declaration

Emancipation - "lovely", until Abraham Lincoln made it concrete

Non-Violence - "very nice" until we saw Martin Luther King demonstrate

the real power of the idea

God - three letters which can mean whatever you want them to mean until they are brought down to earth in the life of Jesus Christ

Faith - "something everybody ought to have", until we see it in the form of a cross.

Well, Isaiah 61, was one of those grand abstractions that inspire people until someone has the audacity to make it specific. That is what Jesus did in Nazareth. He filled in the blanks: and suddenly the poor, blind, captives, oppressed were no longer vague ideas - but those wretched, dirty people out there in the street. And so they became furious, and it seems to me people have been responding in much the same way ever since.

The trouble is that as soon as we fill in the blanks we are forced to cross a line that makes us most uneasy. As soon as we try to take our Lord seriously we find our piety and politics confronting each other. And that is something nobody wants to do. In the first place things are never black or white in the political arena, but a frustrating shade of gray. And besides, the church has never been very good at playing politics: when it has accrued political power in the past it has abused it as badly as Tammany Hall. And so traditionally we have kept them separate: our religion is safely "out of this world."

In our community the combined Christian witness on matters that are important simply doesn't exist. There are individual exceptions: there are heroic exceptions. But the only thing that we've ever done together is to quietly ask that the Christmas parade be held a little later in the day so that our worship services wouldn't be disturbed.

We need a revival: a revival of honest-to-God, Christ-like, New Testament Faith that sees the world as the place God loves so much he sent his Son into it: a revival that calls people to follow Jesus Christ - not out of the world but into it where people live and earn their wages and hurt and hope and die.

Two old hymns come to mind "I walked today where Jesus walked": I doubt that. For the people who love to sing that hymn wouldn't be caught dead walking where Jesus walked, touching lepers, extending understanding to a prostitute, eating and drinking with the poor and outcase.

"Jesus calls us; oe'r the tulmult....

Day by day his sweet voice soundeth

Saying 'Christian, follow me'"

Well now I doubt that if the Church of Jesus Christ - or you or I - allowed the voice of Jesus to be heard that it would sound very sweet. Rather, I would expect the bull-roar of a man insisting that we fill in the blanks: that we stop fawning over him and begin to act in the world as if we were really citizens of God's Kingdom.

I can hear him asking about the poor - the hungry - the Welfare Department and the Food Stamp Program.

I can hear him asking about the blind - and wondering about our agenda in education and medical care.

I can hear him asking about the oppressed and wondering where we were when prison reform was being discussed in the legislature.

Congressman John Brademas warned his fellow churchmen: (2)

"If the Christian Church today fails to touch on the 'weightier matters of the law' - on the treatment of (Blacks) in both North and South, on the paradox of poverty in the richest nation in human history, on the slums still festering in our major citis, on the problems of devising a tolerable peace in a nuclear world - then on what matters will it touch? If the church has nothing to say on these great issues, it has little of significance to say about anything, because these are the crucial issues of our times."

Now, in none of this is there the suggestion that it is the job of the Church to accrue political power, or to allign itself with a particular

political ideology. What is here - what is in the Gospel - is the insistence that piety and politics do mix: that our task as followers of Jesus Christ is located in the world: the world from which becomes too much for us at times - the world that in 1974 looks so frightening and complex that we'd like nothing better than to escape from it for a while.

Our world - into which Jesus Christ invites us to follow him - has caused many of us to become numb. I think Watergate has done that to us. We are being pushed past the limits of caring any more. With each consequent revelation of dishonesty, deception, cover-up we find ourselves wanting it to go away: to excuse it - to look for some way of escaping its implications. And that, I believe, is a religious problem.

Eric Fromm recently said that (3) "The difference today is not between those who believe and those who do not."

That, finally is where Luke 4 takes us. We are called by Jesus Christ to care, specifically, for other people: to be citizens of God's Kingdom, by realigning our priorities so that they correspond with his. We are called to follow our Lord, not "out of this world" - but precisely into it: into the city streets where piety and politics look the same: into the world where abstractions becomes terribly specific. For it is there that his Kingdom exists.

And it all began in Nazareth when he found where it was written:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to
-preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim
- release to the captives;
and recovering of sight to the blind
- to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."*

And then said:

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled." AMEN

Father, it would be so comfortable to remain abstract. We'd like our religion to help us get away from all the noise and tension of our life. God, save us from that. And give us that courage to follow where you lead and to be what you want us to be, Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN